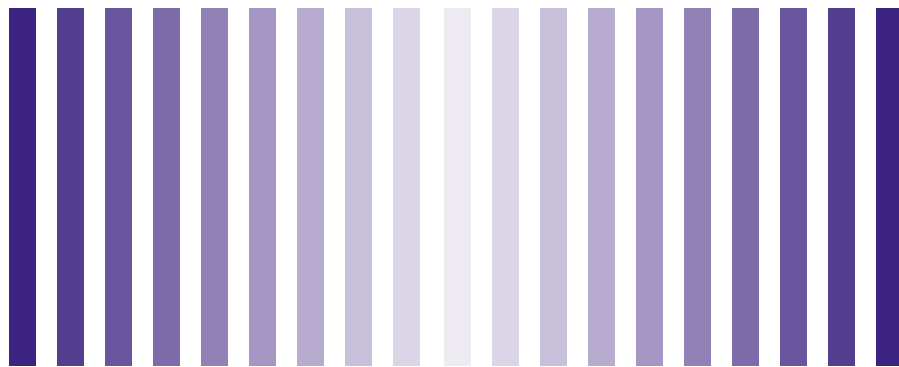


IN SEARCH OF THE Balanced Leader

It's not enough to have leadership traits.
Here's how to avoid "leader burnout" and keep the equilibrium you need.

BY DONNA JENSON



How does one warrant the title of "leader"? Be it a task, a work group, a community, a movement, or an organization—leaders are the people who take on the responsibility for making sure it moves smoothly forward.

Full-time leadership in any arena can be a rigorous and demanding job. To take it on without a sense of balance is to invite stress and burnout and, ultimately, produces ineffective leadership. And yet, balanced leaders are all too rare.

We can all recall certain times when we were balanced—when what we were doing hummed along, gave us pleasure in the doing, and went just right. The problem, however, is how to *stay* in that balanced state.

Three Keys to the Balanced Leader

Balanced leaders attain an equilibrium which keeps them open, relaxed, and confident. Let's take a closer look at these three components to being a balanced leader:

Open means being flexible, interested, accessible, receptive, communicative, and honest with yourself and others. It does not mean being a doormat.

Relaxed means you are at ease and comfortable with yourself, your environment, and the people around you. It does not mean you don't care.

Confident means you like yourself and trust your own thinking and instincts. It does not mean you think you are better than others.

Being open, relaxed, and confident is part of our human nature. Anything less is imposed from the outside by the environment, by cultural and social conditioning, or by physical or emotional hurts. Through a host of experiences between birth and adulthood, we are made to believe that it is not always safe to be open, relaxed, or confident.

Hot, Cold, or Just Right?

To be balanced, you need to be like Goldilock's porridge—not too hot, not too cold, but just right. In the extreme, being “too hot” means you're an angry, demanding dictator. Being “too cold” means you're distant and inaccessible.

To illustrate, let's look at what can happen in some common leadership situations. (We'll call the leaders Jean and John.)

A. Jean is leading a group and intends to share some new ideas with them.

- When she's *balanced*, she's thinking, “I can't wait to share this with them and get their feedback.”
- If she's *hot*, she's thinking, “They're not going to get this, and I'll have to work twice as hard to bring them along.”
- If she's *cold*, she's thinking, “These ideas are stupid, I'm canceling the meeting.”

B. There is work to be done that John can't or doesn't want to do by himself.

- When he's *balanced*, he thinks of creative ways to invite and interest others to join him.
- If he's *hot*, he orders others to do the work.
- If he's *cold*, he either does it all alone or ignores the work completely and hopes it will disappear.

C. Jean has made a mistake.

- When she's *balanced*, she takes responsibility for what she did wrong, corrects it, assesses what she has learned from it, and moves on.
- If she's *hot*, she either blames everything and everyone else or pretends nothing is wrong.
- If she's *cold*, she blames herself, spending more time feeling guilty than correcting the mistake.

D. John is working with others on a project.

- When he's *balanced*, he cooperates, collaborates, and enjoys the collective creative process.
- If he's *hot*, he controls, dictates, and believes he has all the right answers.
- If he's *cold*, he gives in to other people's ideas and

FIGURE 1. Here is how the balanced leader acts, as opposed to the person who feels either superior or inferior.

SUPERIOR Domineering	BALANCED Creative	INFERIOR Victimized
Out of touch with one's own feelings	Knows own feelings but they don't stop actions	Overwhelmed by one's own feelings
Dictates	Invites	Begs or hides
Arrogant	Attentive	Shut down/numb
Ignores own mistakes or blames others	Owens one's mistakes corrects, learns and moves on	Whines, makes excuses
Angry	Relaxed	Depressed
Knows everything	Curious	Knows nothing

believes everyone else knows better.

Put simply: “too hot” means feeling and behaving superior; “too cold” means feeling and behaving inferior. Figure 1 gives an overview of how being balanced compares to either of these extremes.

Seven Paths to Self-Understanding

The root of behaving and feeling balanced is self-confidence. The root of behaving and feeling either superior or inferior is fear. What or who is making you afraid will to some extent determine whether you act superior or inferior.

Fear is not a delightful emotion to admit, to oneself or others. It lies at the pit of our sense of vulnerability. Yet acknowledging fear is the first step to conquering it and moving on.

When you feel you are out of balance, ask yourself if you are afraid. The next obvious question is, “What are you afraid of?” Losing control? Being controlled? Or, worse yet, being out of control?

It takes time and attention to understand our own fears. Here are seven ways to gain self-understanding next time a situation throws you off balance:

1. **Sequester yourself** so you won't be disturbed, and take 15 minutes to write in a stream-of-consciousness manner. Put pen to paper and don't stop. If you can't think of anything to write, simply repeat the last sentence over and over until something new appears on the page. This is not writing you will share with others; it's for yourself. It's to help you dig down and have a heart-to-heart talk with yourself. The results can be invaluable.
2. **A retreat into nature** can sometimes do the trick. Find a garden, a park—any quiet, natural setting. The equilibrium of the natural world can be contagious, a reminder of your own sense of balance.
3. **Talk to a friend** or colleague about the situation—not so much to get their advice as to hear your own voice. Try to verbalize all aspects of the situation.

FIGURE 2. Use your answers to these questions to help you stay balanced as a leader.

1. Who is the most balanced person you know? What is it like being with that person?
2. Have you ever worked closely with a balanced leader? What was that like?
3. What positive things happen for you when you are acting from a balanced perspective?
4. When was the last time you felt balanced? What was going on? How long did it last?
5. When was the last time you felt extremely off balance? Were you experiencing feelings of superiority or inferiority?
6. When you are open, relaxed and confident, how do people react to you?
7. What are the best ways for you to get balanced when you tip into superiority? into inferiority?
8. What and who helps you stay balanced?

Describe how you would be acting and feeling if you were balanced. Hearing your own description can go a long way toward making it happen.

4. **Make an agreement** with one or more trusted friends that you will tell each other when you're off balance. There needs to be trust and respect for this to work—but it's also a way to build trust and respect.
5. **Form or join** a support group. Regular meetings with a group of peers who share similar responsibilities can be extremely helpful. These peers can become a constant source of support between meetings as well.
6. **Exercise.** Take yourself for a brisk walk. Swim. Stretch. Do some deep breathing. Find a way to detach yourself from your mind and get into your body for a piece of time.
7. **Sometimes all you need** is five or 10 minutes of peace and quiet. Lock the door, turn off the phone, turn down the lights, turn on your most soothing music. Take a small vacation from the rumblings that are setting you off balance.

Attending to the maintenance and growth of your leadership style will be well worth the time. Think of it as your own leadership fitness program.

Situational or Chronic Imbalance?

As you begin to pay more attention to your leadership style, you will become more keenly aware of when imbalances occur. You will also begin to realize whether your imbalance is situational or chronic.

Situational imbalance is usually caused from the out-

side. The phone machine is broken; three of the five people needed for your staff meeting have called in sick; a check bounced; the water main has broken in the office basement. No wonder you're a little testy. Any one of the seven suggestions listed above could give you the boost you need.

Chronic imbalance is another thing altogether. It can be identified (though not always easily) when your emotional level does not match the situation. Negative social conditioning and painful experiences in your youth may contribute to your not being able to see situations clearly. You may discover that, even though you try your best to stay balanced, it's not working. It may be that you need two intelligences thinking about your balance—yours and one other. The world is filled with excellent professionals—therapists, spiritual people, counselors—who can help you understand and overcome areas of chronic imbalance that consistently get in your way.

Choose Your Own Way

Take the time to write out the responses that come to your mind as you read the questions in Figure 2. Your answers will help you devise your own best ways to keep your leadership equilibrium. Whatever ways you choose, the important thing is to pay attention to your leadership style so that you will continue to stay balanced and lead well. ■

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